



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Vertical love

**Citation for published version:**

Malara, DM & Boylston, T 2016, 'Vertical love: Forms of submission and top-down power in Orthodox Ethiopia', *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 40-57. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2016.600403>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.3167/sa.2016.600403](https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2016.600403)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is a post-peer-review, precopyedited version of an article published in Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Malara, D., & Boylston, T. (2016). Vertical Love, Social Analysis, 60(4), 40-57 is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2016.600403>

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## **Vertical Love: Forms of Submission and Top-Down Power in Orthodox Ethiopia**

**Abstract:** The classical sociological literature on Amhara hierarchy describes a society based around open relations of domination and an obsession with top-down power. This article asks how these accounts can be reconciled with the strong ethics of love and care that ground daily life in Amhara. We argue that love and care, like power, are understood in broadly asymmetrical terms rather than as egalitarian forms of relationship; as such they play into wider discourses of hierarchy, but also serve to blur the distinction between legitimate authority and illegitimate power.

**Keywords:** Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, love, hierarchy, Sainthood

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians consider top-down power a fact of life. In religious, political and domestic spheres (and in the articulations and overlaps between these), showing proper deference to power is a critical social skill, alongside learning to manipulate one's connections and social resources in order, if not to become powerful oneself, at least to obtain the protections and benefits that power properly executed can offer. Whether this asymmetrical, top-down model of the workings of power is best described as a 'value', however, is a more complex question. This essay looks to trace ambiguities between understandings of top-down power as a moral good and as coercion in contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox society. Is top-down power understood as a value in the sense of a good and proper way to organize society, or simply as something that people desire, whether it is moral or not to do so? Sometimes it seems that top-down power is treated as a virtue; at others, people describe the overwhelmingly vertical nature of their social relationships as an injustice and an imposition. This is because relations of love and exploitation alike are understood as basically unequal. We will suggest that the exercise of top-down power in Ethiopia coexists with and depends on asymmetrical or hierarchical understandings of love and mediation, exemplified by relationships between saints and people, between parents and children, and ultimately between God and humanity.

In Ethiopia as elsewhere moral authority and coercive power feed into one another so as to often become indistinct. This apparent contradiction is to be found at the root of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian popular theology. Archetypally, the power of God is both that of ultimate coercion and ultimate moral recognition. The proper attitude of humans towards God is loving fear: to love God in spite of or because of his total power over you. God's choices cannot or should not be questioned by human subjects, nor are they appropriate objects of individual or public moral scrutiny. Divine will is ultimately placed beyond the possibility of human comprehension. The negative value attributed to excessive speculation

about the divine based on its immanent manifestation – an attitude that “verges on blasphemy” (Levine 1965: 67) – reinforces the hierarchical distance between Creator and creation. The marker of hierarchy is not just that you must obey your superiors, but that you must not question them: hierarchical relations are defined by silence. Loving God beyond understanding and questioning, in spite of or because of his power over humanity, may describe the core paradox of power in Orthodox Ethiopia. This paradox is central to forms of submission and attitudes toward legitimate power in different social arenas.

We have found that the play of power and legitimate authority that is typical of hierarchy cannot be described solely in terms of the organising values understood per Dumont (2013: 290) as culturally-specific notions of the good; we have to pay attention to how people actually live with those principles. This may involve competing values (Robbins 2007; Weber 1949), or simply pragmatic ways in which people negotiate with the power of others. It is one thing to describe the values on which a society supposes itself to be based, and quite another to ask whether and how those values hold up in practice, and who, exactly, considers them as values rather than impositions. That is, it is not enough to describe the logic, or even competing logics, of hierarchy. It may well be possible and correct to describe Ethiopian Orthodox society, like Dumont’s India, in terms of encompassing values such as submission to divine will, and consequent values such as patriarchal authority. But such a description is incomplete unless it can also convey the paradoxes of living in asymmetric relations, where power and legitimacy are constantly morphing into one another. By shifting attention to the ethnographic practicalities of how people live with, manage, build, sustain, and change asymmetric relationships in their religious and family lives and in negotiation with a dominant value system, we hope to produce a fuller picture of the power-value relationship. Most significantly, this is the scale at which requirements of love and care come to the fore.

This paper is based on ethnographic research by Malara in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar and by Boylston on the Zege peninsula in semi-rural Amhara region, and later in Addis Ababa. We have both worked on Orthodox Christianity, itself a deeply hierarchical religion, and its place in everyday life. This paper comes out of our conversations about the contemporary relevance of the classic sociological literature on Amhara hierarchy (e.g. Hoben 1970, 1973; Levine 1965; Messay 1999; Molvaer 1995). Amhara social relations in the Imperial era tended to be described in terms of hierarchical dominance, both internally and with regard to other groups in Ethiopia (Donham 1986; Weissleder 1965), and we both perceived important continuities in these patterns in contemporary Federal Ethiopia. But we equally felt that the classical image of Amhara Christian hierarchy, dominance, and individualism needed to be both updated and qualified. While we show that unequal relationships remain central to Ethiopian Orthodox understandings of how social life works, we argue that these relations include strong idioms of protection and care that can neither be reduced to power nor wholly separated from it.

## **Hierarchy and Love**

We begin by suggesting that the best perspective from which to understand hierarchy and love is neither holism nor methodological individualism but somewhere in between: in the making of relationships, and in the exemplary models and social resources that are available to people in building relationships. The scholarly consensus on Amhara society suggests that most models for social relationships are vertical – that is, involving asymmetries of power and/or status (Levine 1965; Messay 1999; Teferi 2012). In kinship and in religion, it is at this level of relationship-formation that the dynamics of normative, asymmetric sociality are most apparent. Chief among these dynamics is a profound ambiguity between relations of love, care, and protection, and those of power and domination. Most scholars of Ethiopia have

overlooked dimensions of sociality and relatedness marked by practices and idioms of care, which are in fact regarded as expressions of socio-religious moral injunctions of the utmost importance (but see Hannig 2014). In focusing only on power, and particularly on its patently coercive aspects, much of the scholarly literature on northern Ethiopia misses a key component of the workings of asymmetry and hierarchy.

As an example of the classical position, take this from Messay Kebede:

the modern meaning of equality before the law is not what Ethiopians have in mind when they speak of justice. In fact, the high respect for social hierarchy empties justice of the notion of equality. Nonetheless, the ranking of justice above all the other virtues may mean that it contains them all... The riddle is solved if the whole thing is referred to clientelism. God is expected to be just in the sense of rewarding those who obey and worship Him... Rewards should be bestowed on them, not for their merits, but for their submission, for their acceptance of the role of God's servants. Divine justice does not therefore implicate equal treatment; rather, it leans toward favouritism, especially for those chosen by God himself (1999: 203).

Messay locates the moral justification for inequality in the Ethiopian social theology of clientelism – a sort of contingent delegation of divine authority. This produces what Messay calls the “fluctuating hierarchy”, in which individuals constantly rise and fall in status depending on achievement and Imperial or Divine whim, but the principle of social asymmetry endures. In contrast to Dumont's (1970) painstaking, contested efforts to show that power and value are separate in the traditional Indian case, here coercive power is

presented as proceeding directly from the source of moral value. Submission to power would therefore be the same thing as submission to legitimate authority.

This is a useful picture, so far as it goes, and captures dynamic, competitive elements of hierarchy that have survived the collapse of the Orthodox Ethiopian empire and still inform a great deal of social action today – as our ethnographic examples will demonstrate. However, the resulting portrayal of an entirely atomised society based on favour-grubbing and ambition is far more individualistic than the reality on the ground, in which a recognition of human selfishness and the realities of power coexists with a deep-seated ethic of mutual care and neighbourliness.

We do not wish to oppose a vertical notion of power to one of horizontal or egalitarian love. On the contrary, we argue that the forms of love and care that are emphasized in Orthodox Ethiopia are themselves largely asymmetrical, and that the local character of coercive power is therefore precisely that it is hard to separate from relations of love and care. Nor is such separation necessarily something that people want.

Anthropologists and historians have paid some attention to the politics of love, usually but not always focusing on romantic love and its relation to prescriptive models of kinship (Abu-Lughod 1986: 208; Gell 2011) or investigating the Western-Capitalist-Christian cultural development of the romantic love complex (MacFarlane 1987; Reddy 2011). The project of recognizing love's politics involves recognizing that love and care are not confined to private or domestic life, but have broad legal, political, and religious ramifications. In contemporary Euro-American discourse this becomes clearest in debates over gay marriage and adoption, in which apparently personal and private relations are made the concern of the whole society. It is in this context that Borneman (1997: 583) has shown the degree of continuity between romantic-sexual relations and those of “caring and being cared for” that, he argues, should be considered a basic premise of sociality: “a shift in the object of anthropological

research...away from either the institution of marriage or categories of kinship, sexual identities, gender inequality, or of power differentials generally, to a concern for the actual situations in which people experience the need to care and be cared for and to the political economies of their distribution.” Note that this introduces an element of benign asymmetry as constitutive of the politics of love.

This asymmetry is present in the Western Christian tradition and its universalization of *agape* as the love of God and all mankind. As Mayblin (2012: 249) writes, *agape* is for Catholics not just a way of relating, but the foundation of the possibility of relationships. It is also fundamentally asymmetric because it can never be reciprocated. The same is true of the love of mothers for their children, being freely and unconditionally given. In Ethiopian Orthodoxy, as in Catholicism, Mary is the key figure of this love, her absence unimaginable within this cosmology. Ethiopian Orthodox discourse refers to Mary as *yefik'ir innat*, “The Mother of Love.”<sup>1</sup> This is a love that equates to the giving of life, which is construed as the ultimate in disinterested, non-reciprocable giving. This love, Mayblin argues, is ontological in its scope (it is a theory of existence), and roots a fundamental, nurturing asymmetry at the heart of Catholic tradition.

Meanwhile, many have also found in Christianity the roots of the contemporary elevation of sexual love; perhaps precisely because of its distinction from *agape* (Reddy 2011; but see MacFarlane 1987). It quickly becomes apparent that Christian love is polymorphous and malleable to a great variety of political economic contexts – from the imperial liberal individualism of the globalizing Anglo-Saxon mainstream (Povinelli 2006) to a paternalistic Catholic charity that, while quite different in its form and inspiration, finds itself equally compatible with neoliberalism (Muehlebach 2013). Schneider (1990) finds in Christian history the destruction of pre-existing ‘equity consciousness.’ While she also acknowledges the egalitarian potential of Christian love, she argues that Christianity’s



hierarchical charter has been the dominant factor in practice.

This literature makes it clear that love – especially in the Christian tradition that has made love more of an obsession than any other – is not necessarily an egalitarian force. Nor is it necessarily a relation that creates unity out of difference, as Hardt (2011: 678) argues:

a political concept of love... would have to extend across social scales and create bonds that are at once intimate and social, destroying conventional divisions between public and private. Second, it would have to operate in a field of multiplicity and function not through unification but the encounter and interaction of differences. Finally, a political love must transform us, that is, it must designate a becoming such that in love, in our encounter with others, we constantly become different

This is distinct, Hardt says, from the Hollywood love story in which we are all searching for the person who will complete us and make us whole. Equally, it differs from the love of nation or race. These are loves of sameness and contribute to reactionary parochialism or xenophobia. In Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, we can find some forms of the love of sameness, such as a fierce allegiance to one's Church as a unifying force. But there is also, and inseparably, a constant reproduction of relations of difference between God, saints, and humans; that is, between protectors and faithful followers. This is not the non-hierarchical difference-in-love that Hardt envisages, but it needs to be acknowledged.

Cole and Thomas's (2009) volume *Love in Africa* aims for a similar politicisation and deprivatisation of the love concept. It shows how the province of love is not just "intimacy", but that intimacy and love are deeply implicated in a field of wider politico-economic forces, colonial legacies, and media representations. Megan Vaughan (2011) argues that the political

nature of love in Africa is probably not so much a colonial phenomenon or a European import, as a fairly universal aspect of the human condition. Rather, it is the notion of a love that transcends politics or personal interest that looks like a specific and unusual invention of the European Christian tradition.

The Euro-American romantic love tradition may portray love as basically a dyadic relationship (Gell 2011; Reddy 2011), but it is just as likely to describe an attachment between people and the collectivities they belong to: love for (and by) the church, or for the nation, or for all of humanity (Muehlebach 2013). The love of a group or institution in which the individual is subsumed can create its own, often highly asymmetrical collectives. This in turn raises the question of how love relates to power. In Orthodox Christian parts of Ethiopia, where the emotional and political attachments of Christians to the hierarchy of their Church and its saints have only intensified since the secularisation of the state (Bonacci 2000; Clapham 1988; Donham 1999), and where many are questioning the applicability of Euro-American egalitarian individualistic models (Girma 2012), these questions have particular political urgency.

### **Love, Power, and Religion**

According to Messay Kebede, Ethiopian Orthodox theories of the morality of power derive from a sort of transcendental clientelism:

the conception of the Ethiopians derived the glory of power from its metaphysical stature. Power is not a mere phenomenon of the world; it binds the created world to the creator and determines its fate. It is therefore the most visible manifestation of the will of God, its favoured language. Accordingly, those who have power in this world appear as those to whom God lends power. So conceived, power in this

world denotes divine favouritism; it is a distinction from the common people, a sign of election. This belief tied every Ethiopian more to God than to his superior (Messay 1999: 184).

In Messay's account, not only does divine hierarchy legitimise worldly political power; worldly power is a manifestation and an index of divine power. Equally important, power and status may be withdrawn as easily as they are given, and the loyalty of one's clients should be expected to readily switch to the new recipient of God's favour – whom they would know precisely by the fact of his obtaining power.

Messay puts power at the centre of a moral value system built around submission to God, and therefore as a good in itself – provided that the powerful demonstrate sufficient generosity toward their subordinates (1999: 155, 203). One submits to God because one loves God, or because it is good to do so (depending on whom you ask and what phrasing they choose). The same goes for saints and especially Mary. New Orthodox hymns are full of expressions of love for Christ, Mary and the Angel Michael, using both the passionate (*fik'ir*) and the tender or friendly (*meweded*) terms that can translate into English as 'love'. Take the following recent composition:

*Mary, Mary, let me say to you,*

*My mother, let me say to you*

*My heart has been cured by your love (fik'ir)*

*Because your plea (on my behalf) has sustained me*

*I stood at your gate begging*

*Having faith in your motherhood*

*My wish was fulfilled*

*My heart has been filled with your love*<sup>2</sup>

There is much that is non-traditional in this hymn, especially the use of Amharic, and its circulation on YouTube and on Visual CDs. Traditional hymns use more figurative language, but still talk about the love between the people, Mary and God (Lee 2011: 225). This modern example calls on archetypal themes of our helplessness, of Mary's intercession, and on the fact that she does this out of love. Mary's efficacy as a loving protector is acknowledged and ratified by passionate statements of gratitude, submission, and loyalty on behalf of the human supplicant. What is implicitly acknowledged is also that the boundlessness and perfection of Mary's love from above is never fully reciprocable by the human party. Even though the language deployed is that of intimacy, this asymmetrical giving reinforces the hierarchical separation between the role of generous patron and helpless supplicant and debtor. Love, again, separates and differentiates while bringing closer.

This intercessional, healing model of love helps to establish the grounds for the model of justice that Messay describes, based on loyal submission and generous rewards. In a discussion of why liberal models have failed in Ethiopia, Girma Mohammed (2012) makes a similar point when he describes Ethiopian thought, across all religious groups, as characterised by "covenant thinking": a patron-client bond based on a foundational promise, which is integral to pan-Ethiopian notions of the good (Robbins 2013). According to Kaplan, this pattern is attested throughout Orthodox hagiographic literature, in the relationship between saints and devotees:

The image of the saint which emerges from the texts is not that of a pious pillar of morality and protector of the unfortunate, but rather of a powerful patron and jealous lord. The saint is celebrated not for his beneficent intervention in the

affairs of mankind, but rather for the obvious favoritism he demonstrates towards those who are devoted to him (Kaplan 1986: 10).

This favouritism has explicit analogues in contemporary political life. As one formerly politically active friend of Malara's describes it, rewards are achieved with and only through the long-term display of loyalty and submission. As this becomes established, the follower can expect a rewards and "favoritism" of the kind described by Kaplan and Messay (see Di Nunzio 2014 for a description of how this clientelism operates at street level).

In practice it is not so easy to differentiate between power that rewards its subjects justly, and power that does not. For most Ethiopians in daily life, vertical power is an unfortunate fact of existence that must be lived with, much more than a moral model for society. The practical question then becomes how to engage with power (divine, political, or parental) so as to manage its excesses, gain advantage, or address the requirements to care and be cared for that constitute so much of everyday life.

### **Mediation and Hierarchy**

In a society where religious or political relations between radically unequal parties are emphasized, the role of mediators is critical. Go-betweens can sometimes protect the weak from the powerful, or appeal on their behalf, so that relations are possible without turning into outright domination. In the Orthodox economy of salvation, saints, angels and especially Mary have special importance as advocates. Part of the purpose of venerating a saint is so that, when you are called to judgement, the saint will speak on your behalf. They can do so because they are closer to and more beloved of God than you are, as Malara's fieldwork demonstrates. The logic of saintly mediating agency was explained by Belaynesh, a woman living in the capital, with the following example: "who do you love more, me or your mother?"

You love your mother more. So if I am not very close to you, I will talk to your mother and ask her to beg you to do what I want from you. And you will do it because of the love that you have for your mother”. Sainly mediation works the same way: saints are close to God, and therefore can intercede with him on others’ behalf.

This is the logic of clientelism. Attaining favour from power is the outcome of fealty and submission, not just of moral righteousness on the part of the recipient of favour. A classic illustration of the precedence of loyalty over righteousness is found in the famous tale of Belay Seb the cannibal. Belay killed and ate his parents and almost every other person he ever met. The combination of patri/matricide and cannibalism makes him a paragon of evil. The exception was one leprous beggar who was begging by the roadside for water, in the name of Mary. Belay, hearing the name, takes pity and gives the beggar a single handful of water. Illustrations of the story in churches across Ethiopia depict Saint Michael weighing the murdered people against the single handful of water. In the panel Mary can be seen casting her shadow over the side of the scale containing the water, causing it to outweigh the murdered people, and so by having answered one request in the name of Mary, Belay is saved. This is a parable of Mary’s love, but also of her efficacy as an advocate and of the “weight” of her favour in the economy of salvation and mercy.

So the advocacy of a good mediator (*amalaj*) can obtain mercy and protection for even the most heinous transgressions. When asked to differentiate Orthodoxy from Protestant ‘heresy’ (*menafik*), priests in Zege consistently say that mediation is the key point. Protestants, in the Orthodox account, deny the intercessional power of Mary; they say she ‘does not mediate’ (*attamaledim*). Protestants say you pray direct to Jesus, while the Orthodox say a saint or angel must convey your prayers to God (Boylston 2012). By the account of one theologically-educated friend, Hagos, to address Jesus by name or as a friend, as some Protestants do, suggests excessive self-confidence, as if you were putting yourself on

his level. Friends of Malara living in Sirategna Sefer, a rather destitute district of Addis Ababa, would often comment that life in the city, and in contemporary Ethiopia in general, is often marked by different forms of moral compromise and that the ascetic efforts necessary to attain higher degrees of purity are hindered by a number of factors inherent to “modern life”. One recurrent example of this was “not having enough time” to dedicate to church attendance because of one’s work or family duties. Seeking saintly mediation is then an act of humility, the acknowledgment of one’s imperfection. It allows busy, troubled people, lacking the time or energy to devote to what they consider proper religious practice, to enlist protectors to compensate for their imperfections, and to seek forgiveness and redemption on their behalf.

According to Hagos, as well as to many other informants of both the authors of this article, when referring to Christ you should use terms of deference like *Gétacchin*, ‘Our Lord’, or *Medhanítacchin*, ‘Our Saviour’. But better is to ask intercession from Mary, which he expressed as, “You can ask Mary, please tell your son to help me.” Some people might even enlist a double mediation, asking a saint to petition Mary to intercede with Christ. In this way mediation and deference are closely related. The Pentecostal heresy, as Orthodox Christians see it, consists in placing Christ too directly in contact with humanity, and therefore showing insufficient deference. As a priest in Addis Ababa put it: “Jesus is the one who is begged by mediators, he is not a mediator himself. How can God mediate with God?” Every act of mediation, the priest reminds us, requires the non-identity of the parties involved. And, as our discussion illustrates, the differential status and positioning within the sacred hierarchy of suppliant, mediator and intended receiver is the critical dynamic of asymmetric mediation.

As in many ritualistic systems, the main index of the value of hierarchy is in gestures of submission. Orthodox Christians practice *sigdet* (‘worship’ but also ‘surrender’) by bowing low and sometimes kissing the ground – before an icon, or before the church, or simply at the

roadside as one passes a church. The *sigdet* can be set as a penance by one's soul father, or can simply be a part of daily religious practice. The *sigdet* is both an act of submission and an identification with the suffering of Christ, and is a central performative index of sacred hierarchy. What Malara's informants stress, however, is that "to do what Christ did" can only produce forms of identification that are partial at best. Indeed, the faithful could never endure or understand the suffering that the saviour underwent. Such reasoning on the phenomenological limits of identification actively recreates distinction, and encourages submissive dispositions by emphasizing human unworthiness and limitation as well as the ultimate incommensurability between divine and human.

The possibility of finding virtue in submission has received some attention recently, as an important counterpoint to studies that focus only on the power-resistance dichotomy (Mahmood 2001a, 2001b; Walker 2012). As these writers note, to voluntarily submit to a power that is thought moral can be a form of agency or self-possession; we do neither ourselves nor our informants any favours when we think of their relationships of submission purely in terms of subjection and dominance. For one thing, this would leave us little room to explain the passion and commitment that people often express for the powers and institutions of which they are subordinate members. And yet it is no more helpful to swing the other way towards a conservative endorsement of hierarchy. Oppression and love are both integral to northern Ethiopian hierarchy; if they were not, it is hard to imagine how people would accept the system.

Abba Geremew, a senior priest, encapsulated this play of love and power when explaining the role of icons in his own home. He kept images of Mary and the Archangels Gabriel and Michael "because I need a mother and two soldiers." Saints and angels are very frequently figured as violent warrior-protectors. Saint George, the national patron, is shown slaying the dragon or, sometimes, helping Ethiopian armies to vanquish foreign invaders. The



archangels carry swords and smite demons. Some of them are known to be frequently *k'ut'u* (short-tempered, angry). This capacity for violence and domination over demons is integral to their protective role. Sometimes it is what makes them worthy of love and devotion. Here, in the capacity for violence that is inherent in relationships of protection, is the basis of the paradox of love, power, and hierarchy.

### **On Fathers and other Great Men: Hierarchy and Submission in Daily Life**

Tales of power, deference, and exploitation have dominated the sociology of Orthodox Ethiopia, but we should qualify these accounts by noting the numerous institutions and ethical codes of care and mutual support that exist in Orthodox society. The Hobbesian hierarchy is not the whole story (Messay 1999: 154); nonetheless accounts of steep and open asymmetry capture something important of prevailing attitudes to power and authority. Asymmetry is everywhere, understood not as a holistic map of a stratified society, but as a diffuse and fluctuating principle of power and asymmetry applicable to most social situations and relationships.

In a manner analogous to the veneration of saints, kinship is hierarchical and incorporates love and the ethics of care with steep power relationships. Generally, people tend to emphasise the disciplinary aspects of fatherhood and the nurturing part of motherhood. A senior priest in Addis Ababa aptly expressed the ideal moral attitudes towards parents through a popular saying *inatih tiwedaleh, abatih takaberaleh*, “You love your mother and honour your father.” The division of parenting labour is considered a foundational fact of the order of things. At the same time, looking after one’s relatives and neighbours is paramount, for reasons no more complex than basic common feeling. The care of the sick is an ethical prerogative, as is the regular visiting of one’s neighbours and the obligation to help those in need if one is able.

Apart from the disciplinary role of parents, especially fathers, children learn principles of hierarchy at meals: adult men eat first and together, women and children afterwards, depending sometimes on what is left. Children or women must carry water to wash the hands, and traditionally feet, of their seniors and guests before and after the meal. At the coffee ceremony with which people receive guests, it is the junior woman (servant, sister, daughter, or wife) who brews and serves the coffee, perched low to the ground below the guests (Rita Pankhurst 1997). The micro-rituals of everyday life transmit and reproduce basic hierarchies of gender and seniority. As deeply learned is a principle that children do not contradict their fathers, as attested by many friends who had otherwise gained high degrees of practical independence. When dealing with social superiors, beginning from one's father, the onus on silence and deference is extremely powerful.

If a son fails to contain his aggressive feelings, voicing openly his disagreement with his father or insulting him, his behaviour is likely to be publically condemned irrespectively of its causes. Indeed, despite recognizing the tension implicit in the etiquette of obedience and deference, friends and informants always spoke of familial hierarchical arrangement as more or less literally divinely sanctioned facts. For many of them, patterns of deferential behaviour have little to do with rational adherence to normative codes, but are rather the naturalization and embodiment of such codes. To express this point with the words of our friend Seyoum, the son of a notorious drunkard:

Even if my father is drunk (*sekkeram*) and annoying (*neznaza*), if he will ask me to fetch water for him I will do it. Even if I am annoyed, even if I know he will forget tomorrow, I will still do it. I would not feel well otherwise. I would feel it here, in my stomach. I would not feel well otherwise, I would feel it here on in my stomach. It is

heavy on me (*yikebdignal*); you feel it here [on the shoulders]. I don't know how to explain it to you.

What informants of different ages, and occupying different roles within a family, all agreed upon is the importance of knowing one's place, but also one's limits (*lik mawek*'). This phrase can be attributed a vast array of meanings according to the context of use. In the domain of familial relationships, it suggests the necessity of respecting the authority of those above you; to speak properly or keep silence when needed; and, in general, to acknowledge the limits of one's agentive possibilities.

The non-contradiction of one's seniors is a hierarchical rule that operates throughout social life, and it reflects the fact that all are born into subordination to their fathers. Levine (1965: 83) writes, "Reverence for one's fathers is perhaps the key legitimating principle in the structure of Amhara morality. This is the outgrowth and foundation of a social system which makes children devoted servants of their fathers and keeps men under their fathers' control until they are fully adult". As Dawit, a young, educated Tigrayan put it, "An obedient child is honourable; a silent child is honourable" (*tazazh lij ch'ewa new; zimtegna lij chewa new*).

However, this authoritarian picture has its mediatory complement: if a child who has displeased her father is willing to apologise, the mother is likely to plead for her. Ashennafi, a young man from Addis Ababa explained: "if your father banishes you from the house, your mother will keep bringing food to you secretly. She will beg your father 'forgive your son'". Mothers embody another modality of power, that of gentle persuasion; a power from below that relies on humility, self-effacement, and begging, thus offering a counterpoint to the top-down, unanswerable, coercive power expected from men. The efficacy of mother as mediators and go-between, their "power", relies on a double proximity. As Dawit says, "your mother is obviously closer to your father than you are but of course she is also closer to you

because she loves you”. Many informants associate the mediating role of mothers within familial hierarchical setting to that of “peace-makers” (*astarak’î*),. Inalienable maternal love is perceived as a sort of social lubricant for the intricate tapestry of hierarchical kinship (though in practice mothers can of course be strict disciplinarians). The gendered division of love and authority, and the mediation between them, is vital to Ethiopian Orthodox understandings of asymmetry. This is the basis of a general model of sociality, and the link between family and religious hierarchy is quite explicit. According to a senior priest in Addis Ababa: “God is the head of the Church; the Church is the head of the man; the man is the head of the woman” ( *Igziyabihér ye béta kristiyan ras new; béte kristiyan ye wend ras new, wend ye sét ras new*).

The authority of fathers and the love of mothers are asymmetrical, and complementary of one another. There still remains a crucial unresolved tension between moral authority and coercive authority. Apart from fathers, elders, and clergy, there is no strict calculus of whom one should show submission or deference to. Nonetheless, in meetings and associations, and on daily encounters on the street, complex patterns of deference apply. The village in rural northern Ethiopia where Boylston has worked was comparatively relaxed about such things, in part due to being a market town that considered itself somewhat progressive. Nonetheless young informants explained how you would show respect to a *t’ilik’ sew*, ‘great person’ or ‘big person’. Two main rules apply: you must bow, and you must “say *ishí* to them” – *ishí* being the ubiquitous Amharic word denoting agreement and acquiescence. And acquiescence is a critical index of power/authority in Ethiopia. As Clapham writes, “The respect for authority makes it very difficult to express any open opposition to a superior short of outright rebellion, for there has been no place for reasoned criticism of his proposals... It is certainly almost unthinkable for an inferior to refuse to obey an order...but it is very common for him

to profess his obedience and then do nothing about it” (1969: 6). What counts is the incontrovertible public acknowledgement of authority or greatness.

Complexities arise, however, when one asks what it is to be a great person. Multiple interlocutors of different ages, men and women, in Addis Ababa and in the village, agree that *t’ilik’net*, greatness, is a function of seniority and wisdom. It is not necessarily a direct correlate of age, for one may be old and foolish, but age tends to confer wisdom and status. *At’ilik’ sew* is the person who breaks up fights and mediates marital disputes. This mediation, like the intercession of saints, can be described as *amelajnet*; mediation and greatness are linked in important ways across different spheres of authority. Monks are good examples of legitimate *t’ilik’ sew*, and hence legitimate mediators, because of their accrued moral and spiritual authority, arising in part from their asceticism (Kaplan 1984: 70-89), and in rural Ethiopia people often rely on monks for dispute resolution.

More prevalent than the greatness that comes with self-effacement, however, is the greatness of the public man. At meetings of the parish or town council, a *t’illik’ sew* must be heard in full, no matter how baroque and tangential their locutions may become (and as in other parts of the world, public lucubration is often itself an index of rank). True greatness also entails obligations: to show largesse, to give protection, and to prevent abuses of power by others.

By this common definition, not all powerful people are great people. Many people become powerful by illegitimate means, be it through witchcraft, or toadying, or violence, without accruing the proper wisdom, seniority, or authority. The difference between power and greatness is widely recognised. However, and this is the important point, everybody equally recognised that one’s behaviour towards a powerful person is exactly the same as towards a great person. You bow to them, and you say *ishí*, ‘ok’. The same goes for rich people. Wealth is categorically not in itself an index of greatness; indeed the ostentation of

wealth, “not being able to handle wealth gracefully”, according to a woman who had returned to Addis Ababa after several years in the United States, “is a shameful behaviour typical of the new rich.” However, it is expected that the wealthy must be shown public deference. As Seyoum put it, there are those you bow to out of respect, and those you bow to out of fear. As he said, “you hate those people. You really hate them. But you still bow to them”. And no essay on Ethiopian power would be complete without citing the famous proverb, “You bow in front and fart behind” (Levine 1965: 93). This blurring between legitimate authority and illegitimate power is where all the trouble lies. After all, gaining authority or greatness also increases one’s coercive power, such that the two can never really be kept separate in practice.

One final note on this hierarchy: it is mainly inclusive, in that you may be subordinate to God or your father, but you are part of their household. This is part of the deal: you take a subordinate position in something bigger, and get to feel part of its successes. But if the ‘fluctuating hierarchy’ in Ethiopia gave most people at least a sense that they could succeed, or were the same basic type of person as those at the top, there are other groups who are just excluded.

These groups, usually traditionally non-landowning, include potters, weavers, slave descendants, and the people known as *Beta Israel*. They have generally been forbidden from marrying outside their group, even to those with whom they shared a religion. This has resulted in the phenomenon of underclass groups across Ethiopia that persist today. Across the country, in Christian areas and non-Christian, exist groups of people who have been firmly and irrevocably consigned to the bottom of society (A. Pankhurst 2003). In Zege, the Weyto canoe-makers occupied such a position, and Christians and Muslims would not marry them, share food or utensils, or allow for them to work as traders outside of their specified

occupations. Here the connection between religious and social hierarchy breaks down somewhat in the face of other complex and persistent stigmas.

The stigmatising of the Weyto is thoroughgoing, and contradicts all usual ethics of care and hospitality. While one is usually compelled to offer food and coffee to a guest, Amhara in Zege and throughout the area will not share food with a Weyto. Whereas relations between parent and child, great man and follower, saint and Christian, and Emperor and subject are inclusive and incorporating, relations between Amhara and Weyto are exclusive. There is no sense that the Weyto should receive rewards for their subjection. It is not clear that these relationships even count as hierarchical. If hierarchy implies a relationship, the Amhara deny any kind of relationship to the Weyto and other outcast groups, who become the *alter* against whom Amhara hierarchy defines itself. The distinction between relations of exclusion/stigma and relations of inclusive subordination seems critical, and may be missed in overgeneral conceptions of hierarchy. The only mediation between mainstream Amhara and marginalized people is through commercial relations – Beta Israel providing knives for the weddings of the Christians, and Weyto selling canoes to people around Lake Tana. This is starkly different from those unequal relationships – between father and son, or humanity and God – that can be mediated by love.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has been consciously light on references to Dumont. This is not because we reject Dumont outright, but because the specific problems of Ethiopian Orthodox hierarchy lead us to look for a different starting point and different perspectives. We have tried to ask what hierarchy looks like from the mundane perspective of everyday relationships, and how these relationships might then integrate, or not, with larger-scale societal values. Orthodox Ethiopia does not fit easily into Dumont's categories of holism/hierarchy and

individualism/egalitarianism: from one perspective, prevailing local social theory looks absolutely holistic and totalizing, painting an orderly cosmos encompassed by God. From another, Orthodox society appears fragmented, fluid, and individualistic, premised more on the open practice of raw power than on an ordered Dumontian scheme of values (Donham 1986).

One way around this problem is to think less in terms of parts and wholes (individuals and societies) and more in terms of relationships (Strathern 1992). As we hope to have shown, Amhara Orthodox Christians tend to take a profoundly relational outlook on life. What is important and distinctive is that this relationality, in both its positive and negative aspects, usually takes asymmetric form. Relationships – with family members, institutions, Church, and God – are shaped both by the circumstances of power, and by notions of the good (the mercy and protection of God, the love of Mary, the authority of fathers). Since they convey authority, these notions of the good are often ripe for exploitation, which is why the selfless love of Mary and mothers are so important. But because of their selflessness, these kinds of love are also unequal and non-reciprocable.

Anthropologies of love, care and submission can help us to move beyond the opposition of individual and society, whether that opposition is conceived in terms of encompassment or domination/resistance. Expressing faith, showing love, and caring for others are ways, as Klaitz (2009: 3) writes, “of authorizing certain forms of intersubjectivity, rather than of asserting self-determining agency.” Power is clearly present in these forms of intersubjectivity, but in moving from the classification of values to the practicalities of relating to people, we gain a much clearer impression of the forms that power takes. The question is not just how values are articulated and authorized and status legitimized, but what kinds of relationships are thinkable and practicable. In Orthodox Ethiopia, most of the modes of legitimate and practical relationship-building are asymmetrical, but to extrapolate from this



to say that the society as a whole is based on domination alone misses much of the reality of how people build their lives together.

Without an account of vertical love and the daily practicalities of care and affection, it is difficult to see how a system as based on naked domination as classical Orthodox society has been supposed to be could ever be liveable, or how claims about the values and virtues of hierarchy could ever be convincing. And yet people do submit willingly – even passionately – to hierarchical powers of many kinds.

This is not to apologise for hierarchy, but to acknowledge its political complexity. To this end, efforts to politicize the concept of love offer a new perspective on hierarchy. Love is not just personal, but is a public concern. It is not just an egalitarian, unifying force, but a principle or a charter for relating that must cope with division, difference, and cases where commensurate return is impossible. Love can be instrumental without being any less emotively forceful, and love ideology has been a key aspect of quite a number of imperial as well as anti-imperial projects. But like hierarchy, love cannot be understood only with reference to totalizing social models. It is found in the way people live out their relationships.

Love is an important part of the mediation of asymmetric relationships – a dynamic that has been called clientelism but that extends, as we have shown, well into the life of kinship, and has registers other than the purely instrumental exchange of loyalty for favour and protection. When discussing mediation and intercession, our friends and informants repeatedly draw on idioms of love. Mary intercedes for us because she loves us, and God hears her pleas on our behalf because he loves her. Likewise, the loving mother pleading with an angry father on behalf of her child is a trope of familial relations.

There is a widespread feeling that attempts to import Western-style individualistic liberal democracy to Ethiopia have not been successful (Maimire 2009; Messay 1999). For Girma Mohammed (2012), this is because the asymmetric model of ‘covenant thinking,’

based on pacts between patrons and followers, is the foundation of pan-Ethiopian social philosophy. Since the covenant is the basis of Ethiopian understandings of what social morality is, to remove them in the name of a foreign individualism is simply anomic. Our argument is that any attempt to understand Ethiopian social philosophy is incomplete without an account of how people live with that philosophy. We have tried to demonstrate how affection, care, and the politics of love are inseparable parts of Ethiopian Orthodox hierarchy as it is lived. Critiques of hierarchy that fail to deal with asymmetric practices of love, care and protection are missing a key aspect of how these systems function in practice.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Naomi Haynes, Jason Hickel, Anita Hannig, , Lucy Lowe, Izabela Orłowska, and Dan Levene for their contributions to this paper.

Tom Boylston's research was funded by an ESRC 1+3 studentship and a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Diego Malara's research was supported by a PhD scholarship from the University of Edinburgh College of Humanities and Social Sciences and a Tweedie Exploration Fellowship.

**Diego Maria Malara** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. His research looks at changing practices of religious mediation and emerging forms of urban subjectivity and relatedness amongst Ethiopian Orthodox city dwellers in Addis Abeba and Bahir Dar.

**Tom Boylston** is a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow in anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. He specializes in ritual, media, and materiality in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian society.

## References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1986. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bonacci, Giulia. 2000. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the State 1974-1991: Analysis of an Ambiguous Religious Policy*. London: Centre of Ethiopian Studies.
- Borneman, John. 1997. "Caring and Being Cared for: Displacing Marriage, Kinship, Gender and Sexuality." *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 154: 573-584.
- Boylston, Tom. 2012. "The Shade of the Divine: Approaching the Sacred in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community." PhD Diss., London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Clapham, Christopher S. 1969. *Haile Selassie's Government*. New York, NY: Praeger.
- Clapham, Christopher. 1988. *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Di Nunzio, Marco. 2014. "Thugs, Spies, and Vigilantes: Community Policing and Street Politics in Inner City Addis Ababa." *Africa* 18, no. 3: 444-465.

- Donham, Donald L. 1986. "Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History." Pp. 3-48 in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, ed. Donald Donham, and Wendy James. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Donham, Donald L. 1999. *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*. Berkeley, CA; Oxford: University of California Press; James Currey.
- Dumont, Louis, 1970. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Dumont, Louis. [1980] 2013. "On Value." Reprinted in *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 1: 287-315.
- Gell, Alfred. 2011. "On Love." *Anthropology of this Century* 2.  
<http://aotcpress.com/articles/love/> (accessed 3 February 2015)
- Girma, Mohammed. 2012. *Understanding Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia: Toward a Hermeneutic of Covenant*. New York, NY and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hannig, Anita. 2012. "The Gift of the Cure: Childbirth Injuries, Clinical Structures, and Religious Subjects in Ethiopia." PhD diss., University of Chicago.
- Hannig, Anita. 2014. "Spiritual Border Crossings: Childbirth, Postpartum Seclusion, and Religious Alterity in Amhara, Ethiopia." *Africa* 84, no. 2: 294-313.
- Hardt, Michael. 2011. "For Love or Money." *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4: 678-682.

- Hoben, Allan. 1970. "Social Stratification in Traditional Amhara Society." Pp. 187-224 in *Social Stratification in Africa*, ed. Arthur Tuden, and Leonard Plotnicov. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Hoben, Allan. 1973. *Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia: The Dynamics of Cognatic Descent*. Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Kaplan, Steven. 1984. *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*. Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Kaplan, Steven. 1986. "The Ethiopian Cult of the Saints: A Preliminary Investigation." *Paideuma* 32: 1-13.
- Klaits, Frederick. 2009. "Faith and the Intersubjectivity of Care in Botswana." *Africa Today* 56, no. 1: 3-20.
- Lee, Ralph. 2011. "Symbolic interpretations in Ethiopic and Ephremic literature." PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Levine, Donald N. 1965. *Wax & Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Macfarlane, Alan. 1987. *The Culture of Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2001a. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2: 202-236.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2001b. "Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of Salat." *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 4: 827-853.

- Maimire Mennasemay. 2009. "The Dekike Estifanos: Towards an Ethiopian Critical Theory." *Horn of Africa* 27: 64-118.
- Mayblin, Maya. 2012. "The Madness of Mothers: Agape Love and the Maternal Myth in Northeast Brazil." *American Ethnologist* 114, no. 2: 240-252.
- Messay Kebede. 1999. *Survival and Modernization: Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press.
- Molvaer, Reidulf K. 1995. *Socialization and Social Control in Ethiopia*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Muehlebach, Andrea. 2013. "The Catholicization of Neoliberalism: On Love and Welfare in Lombardy, Italy." *American Anthropologist* 115, no. 3: 452-465.
- Pankhurst, Alula. 1992. *Resettlement and Famine in Ethiopia: The Villagers' Experience*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Pankhurst, Alula. 2003. "Introduction: Dimensions and Conceptions of Marginalisation." Pp. 1-26 in *Peripheral People: The Excluded Minorities of Ethiopia*, ed. Dena Freeman, and Alula Pankhurst. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press.
- Pankhurst, Rita. 1997. "The Coffee Ceremony and the History of Coffee Consumption in Ethiopia." Pp. 516-539 in *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective. Papers of the 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Kyoto, 12-17 December 1997*, ed. Katsuyoshi Fukui, Eisei Kurimoto, and Masayoshi Shigeta. Kyoto: Shokado Booksellers.

- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2006. *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2009. "Beyond Good and Evil: Whither Liberal Sacrificial Love?" *Public Culture* 21, no. 1: 77-100.
- Reddy, William M. 2011. *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Robbins, Joel. 2007. "Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Cultural Change." *Ethnos* 72, no. 3: 293-314.
- Robbins, Joel. 2013. "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3: 447-462.
- Schneider, Jane. 1990. "Spirits and the Spirit of Capitalism." Pp. 24-53 in *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, ed. Ellen Badone. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1992. "Parts and Wholes: Refiguring Relationships in a Post-Plural World." Pp. 74-106 in *Conceptualizing Society*, ed. Adam Kuper. London: Routledge.
- Teferi Abate Adem. 2012. "The Local Politics of Africa's Green Revolution in South Wollo." *African Studies Review* 55, no. 3: 81-102.
- Thomas, Lynn M., and Jennifer Cole. 2009. "Introduction: Thinking Through Love in Africa." Pp. 1-30 in *Love in Africa*, ed. Cole Jennifer, and Thomas Lynn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Vaughan, Megan. 2011. "The History of Romantic Love in sub-Saharan Africa: Between Interest and Emotion." *Proceedings of the British Academy* 167, no. 1: 1-24
- Walker, Harry. 2012. "Demonic Trade: Debt, Materiality, and Agency in Amazonia." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18: 140-159.
- Weber, Max. 1949. *The Methodology of the Social Science*. New York: Free Press.
- Weissleder, Wolfgang. 1965. "The Political Ecology of Amhara Domination." PhD diss., University of Chicago.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Amharic transliteration is based on the system used by A. Pankhurst (1992), which we find most appropriate for non-specialists.

<sup>2</sup> Mezmur *Maryam Maryam* by Kibrom Marse

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEzqWGvHu8c> (accessed 4 September 2013).

Translation by the authors.